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The Soldiers in the Garden

Isla Negra, Chile, September 1973

After the coup,
the soldiers appeared
in Neruda's garden one night,
raising lanterns to interrogate the trees,
cursing at the rocks that tripped them.
From the bedroom window
they could have been
the conquistadores of drowned galleons,
back from the sea to finish
plundering the coast.

The poet was dying;
cancer flashed through his body
and left him rolling in the bed to kill the flames.
Still, when the lieutenant stormed upstairs,
Neruda faced him and said:
There is only one danger for you here: poetry.
The lieutenant brought his helmet to his chest,
apologized to señor Neruda
and squeezed himself back down the stairs.
The lanterns dissolved one by one from the trees.

For thirty years
we have been searching
for another incantation
to make the soldiers
vanish from the garden.